

As of 2026 how many cultures with active languages still do not have an active writing system worldwide? As a follow-up, how many do not have entire Bibles written in their native tongue, or even the New Testament?



I now have comprehensive, up-to-date data from authoritative sources. Let me compile the full answer.

Languages Without Writing Systems

As of 2025–2026, there are approximately **7,159 living languages** worldwide according to Ethnologue's 28th edition. Of these, roughly **3,011 languages are likely unwritten** — meaning they have no developed writing system or script. That represents just over 40% of all living languages. An additional ~4,153 have *some* form of writing system, though Ethnologue cautions that having an alphabet doesn't always mean it is widely used or that high literacy exists in that script.^{[0][1]}

A parallel database, ScriptSource, offers a slightly different breakdown: 3,661 languages are known to be written, 719 are confirmed unwritten, and the written status of another 2,586 languages is uncertain. Given that uncertainty, the true count of functionally unwritten languages could fall anywhere between roughly **700 and 3,000**, with most linguists placing the working estimate near the higher end of that range.^[2]

Geographic Concentration

Unwritten oral languages are heavily concentrated in specific regions:^[3]

- **India** — over 1,000 unwritten indigenous languages and dialects
- **Mexico** — over 100 unwritten indigenous languages and dialects
- **Sub-Saharan Africa** and **Oceania (Pacific Islands)** — hundreds of small tribal and indigenous languages with no script
- **South and Southeast Asia** — numerous minority languages of small ethnic communities

Languages Without the Bible (or New Testament)

This is where the missiological data becomes remarkably granular. As of **June 2026**, Wycliffe UK's ProgressBible Snapshot reports:^[4]

Scripture Access Status	Number of Languages
Complete Bible	801
Complete New Testament (no full Bible)	1,835
Only portions of Scripture	1,516
No Scripture, but translation in progress	~2,749
No Scripture at all	3,241
No Scripture AND no work in progress	1,677
Considered "vital" and awaiting first translation	540

Out of 7,393 total living languages, **3,241 languages have zero Scripture** as of June 2026. That means roughly **44% of the world's languages** have not a single translated verse of the Bible. Of those, **1,677 have no translation work even in progress**, and **540** of those are considered linguistically and demographically viable — spoken by an estimated **37.5 million people** who are completely without Scripture in their heart language.^[4]

As of January 1, 2026, **541 languages still need Bible translation work to begin for the very first time**, down significantly from 985 just a year prior in mid-2024. This dramatic drop is largely attributed to AI-assisted translation tools and a surge in indigenous church-led translation movements.^{[5][6][7]}

Rapid Recent Progress

The pace of change is accelerating at an extraordinary rate:^{[8][4]}

- Bibles and New Testaments are being completed at a rate of **nearly one every 3 days**
- A new language translation project launches **every single day on average**
- In September 2025, Wycliffe reported that **197 million people received a complete Bible in their language for the first time** in the preceding year
- A further **54 million people received a New Testament for the first time** in the same period

Languages Without a Complete Bible

Combining languages with only NT portions, only Scripture portions, and no Scripture at all, approximately **5,750+ languages** lack a full Bible (Old and New Testaments). More specifically:^[4]

- **~790–801 languages** have the complete Bible^{[7][4]}
- **~1,800 additional languages** have at least a New Testament^[7]
- **~1,490–1,516 languages** have only partial Scripture portions^{[7][4]}
- **3,241 languages** have nothing translated at all^[4]

Given your background in textual scholarship, it's worth noting that **1 in 5 people globally** — roughly 1.6 billion — still do not have a complete Bible in their first language, despite the fact that the complete Bible now exists in **801 languages** covering the vast majority of the world's population by sheer speaker count.^{[7][4]}